

Hermeneutic Applications from the Patristic Exegetes

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Abstract: *This paper examines modern hermeneutic approaches and how patristic exegetes can complement interpretative methods. Modern hermeneutics apply different procedures depending on the genre. Kannengiesser's Handbook of Patristic Exegesis is used to summarize patristic views by specific book and genre, while Russell's Playing with Fire, Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard's Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, and Kaiser and Silva's, Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics frame the range of modern hermeneutic approaches. Perspectives on spiritual formation are addressed per genre since it is important for biblical interrelation and application and was valued by patristic exegetes like Augustine. The paper shows how patristic exegetes focused on the spiritual and seeking the Bible's deeper meaning. It demonstrates how Russell's spiritual formation emphasis aligns with Augustine's spiritual burning that transformed his life and how this emphasis aligns with the patristic exegetes' desire to seek deeper spiritual meaning in scripture.*

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Patristics, Historiography, Spiritual Formation, Genre

Introduction

Hermeneutics is the practice or discipline of interpretation. Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means to explain or interpret. From Greek mythology, Hermes was the Greek god who was the spokesman or interpreter for the other gods. In Acts 14:12 Paul was call Hermes. The traditional meaning for hermeneutics is the discipline that deals with principles of interpretation. It is the science of interpretation.¹ Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard point out that interpretation is necessary in art and science and that several factors have to be addressed, (1) meaning of the message, (2) the text itself, (3) the author and audience, and

¹ Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), xix–xx.

(4) impact of distance, via the time from event, geographical distance, cultural distance, language difference, and divine factors.²

A systematic process for biblical modern interpretation is to, (1) identify the biblical passage genre, (2) determine the passage main idea or theme, (3) make observations about the structure along with the literary, grammatical, historical, and cultural insights of the passage. (4) interpret the passage meaning with meditation and observations, and (5) apply the passage to the life of the reader and those around them.³ There is spiritual formation in the biblical interpretation process. Determining the core of the material, accurately understanding the genre, author's intent, and context are all very important. The patristic spiritual focus would endorse this approach. Their tools were not as advanced, but they reached spiritual depth in interpretation of the timeless biblical text.

Coming to God's word for transformation involves spiritual formation. Russell used the analogy of fire, encouraging readers to be close to the flame so they burn inside with God's zeal. Studying God's word brings a burning heart. God's word touches the human-centric world. As people transform and burn for Christ, they align with God's vision rather than their own. By recognizing and confronting one's biases, one sees the true meaning of God's word. Spiritual formation is a key element. The patristic exegetes focused on knowing the deeper elements of God's Word, and applying it in their lives, as well as a spiritual focus looking upward, was prominent.⁴

Effective modern Bible interpretation considers the genre of the passage. Figure 1 shows the amount of historical context per genre to consider and Table 1 summarizes biblical genres.

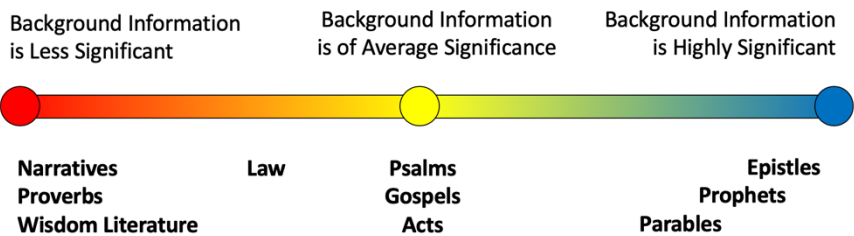
² William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 8–19.

³ Walt Russell, *Playing with Fire* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), 278–80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–10.

Figure 1: Significance of Historical Background: Least–Most

Spectrum of Biblical Genre



Keep in mind the genre of the Bible passage and how important the background information is to gaining proper insight into the author's intent

Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 187.

Table 1: Biblical Genres

Biblical Genres	
Class	Books
Historical narrative	Genesis, the first Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah
Law	The last half of Exodus; also Leviticus, Deuteronomy
Wisdom	Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes
Psalms	Psalms, Song of Solomon, Lamentations
Prophecy	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
Apocalyptic	Daniel, Revelation
Gospel	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Acts	Acts
Epistle	Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude

Table 2 summarizes Kannengiesser’s patristic genre classification survey for both canonical and non-canonical biblical books.

Table 2: Kannengiesser's Biblical Genre Categories

Category	Books	Genre(s)	Category	Books	Genre(s)
Pentateuch	Genesis	Historical narrative	Minor Prophets	Hosea	Prophecy
	Exodus	Law, His. narrative		Joel	Prophecy
	Numbers	Law, His. narrative		Amos	Prophecy
	Deuteronomy	Law, His. narrative		Obadiah	Prophecy
Historical Books	Joshua	Historical narrative		Jonah	Prophecy
	Judges	Historical narrative		Habakkuk	Prophecy
	1, 2 Sam, 1, 2 Kgs	Historical narrative		Zephaniah	Prophecy
	1, 2 Maccabees	Historical narrative		Haggai	Prophecy
Wisdom and Poetry	Job	Wisdom		Zechariah	Prophecy
	Psalms	Psalms		Malachi	Prophecy
	Proverbs	Wisdom	Gospels and Acts	Matthew	Gospel
	Ecclesiastes	Wisdom		Mark	Gospel
	Song of Songs	Wisdom		Luke & Acts	Gospel, Acts
	Ecclesiasticus	Wisdom		John	Gospel
	Wisdom	Wisdom	Pauline Epistles and Hebrews	Pauline	Epistle
Major Prophets	Isaiah	Prophecy		Other	Epistle
	Jeremiah	Prophecy		Hebrews	Epistle
	Lamentations	Prophecy	Catholic Epistles	James	Epistle
	Baruch	Prophecy		1 Peter	Epistle
	Ezekiel	Prophecy		1, 2, 3 John	Epistle
	Daniel	Apoc., Proph.	Revelation	Revelation	Apocalyptic

Source: Kannengiesser, Handbook of Patristic Exegesis), 297.

God's Plan: Old Testament Narratives

Patristic Perspectives

Kannengiesser's discussion on the Pentateuch and the historical books in Table 2 align with this section. The patristic exegetes explored Genesis narratives, but there was not detailed focus on the creation account as there is today with a predominant scientific mindset. There was exegetical exploration of Exodus with Jesus being viewed as a second or new Moses. Paul also considered this theme. Numbers was not explored as much as other books. Deuteronomy also received less attention from patristic exegetes.⁵

For the historical book, the book of Joshua finds itself being used as typological references for later realities. The names of Joshua and Jesus are homonyms. Joshua is seen in light of the fact that Jesus and the Gospel are superior to Moses and the Law. Another typological reference is the comparison of Rahab's house and the scarlet cord as a typological reference to the church and the blood of Christ. Judges received less attention than other books. The book of Judges showed the patristic exegetes tended towards a Christological exegesis of the Old Testament. There also was an emphasis on moral exegesis. 1 and 2 Kings with 1 and 2 Samuel were all included in one book during the patristic era. This material has less exegesis than other areas. Personalities like David and Goliath were interpreted allegorically. David is known as a significant individual from this material and appears in other areas of the Old Testament, primarily in the Psalms. Kannengiesser includes an assessment of 1 and 2 Maccabees and notes they were widely referenced. During the patristic era they were considered canonical and via the councils of Hippo (393), Carthage (397), and Trent (1546).⁶

Old Testament Historical Narrative

Russell argued there are three levels of narrative and histories in the bible. The patristic Alexandrian approach promotes exploring higher levels of God's purpose and message in the Old Testament narratives. Below are three levels of possible interpretation in the Old Testament Narratives.⁷ Patristic exegetes like Origen and Augustine would encourage seeking these higher and deeper levels of Biblical meanings.

⁵ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 278–86.

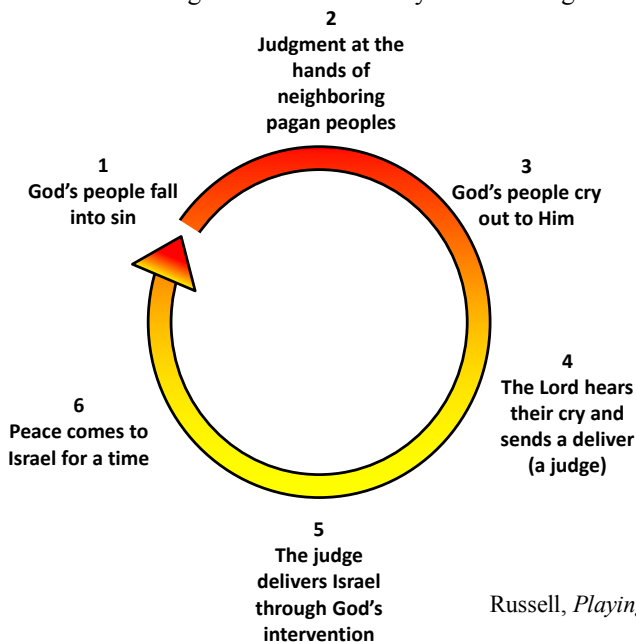
⁶ Ibid., 290–94.

⁷ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 106–7.

- Top Level – eternal, universal plan of God (most important for understanding life)
 - Understanding the role of God in human history
 - God is working out God’s plan through peoples’ lives
- Middle level – story of God’s people (most important for identity and heritage)
 - Identity as God’s people
 - History and heritage as the children of God
- Lowest level – stories of individuals (important in offering models)
 - This is the level most readers end up focusing on

By looking at larger portions of the Old Testament narrative rather than looking at smaller components, one can see repeated emphases and recurring themes, like in **Error! Reference source not found.** There is a clear pattern in Judges that illustrate a pattern in Israel’s behavior. This is also seen in Judah’s sin, Babylonian captivity, and restoration.⁸ Patristics would include allegorical and typological considerations for this pattern.

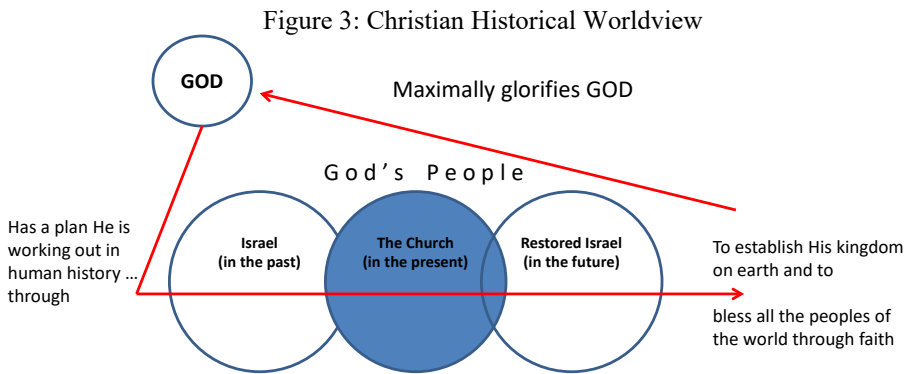
Figure 2: Israel’s Sin Cycle from Judges



Source:
Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 110.

⁸ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 109–10.

Figure 3 illustrates the Christian historical worldview. If one focuses on person fulfillment, then the goal would be to maximize personal fulfillment and happiness. This shapes how one views the world and the word of God. The word of God does speak against this perspective. Rather, it shows God's plan and how the Church sees its preeminent position with the blue circle: God uses the nation of Israel and in the present the Church and finally restored Israel—the Church is only part of the plan. The Old Testament narratives declare repeatedly that God is the shaper of history, ultimately in control of this world and the next. God co-labors with the people of God, who endured very difficult times. Ultimately, God's plan for history is to bless, not curse.⁹



Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 187.

Spiritual Formation by Narratives and Histories

Genesis 12:1–3 is useful for spiritual formation. God promises to bless Abram (Abraham) by setting up a covenant with him. This blessing involves land, seed and blessing as listed below:

- Land—To the land which I will show you
- Seed—And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great

⁹ Ibid., 101–4.

- Blessing—And so you shall be a blessing and I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Derived from Gen 12:1–3)

Old Testament narratives and histories are prominent in the Word of God. They flow through twenty-one books of the Old Testament. Since this is a large part of the God’s word, it is a weighty part that should be considered important and crucial. Table 3 summarizes the contributions of the Old Testament narratives and histories to spiritual formation.¹⁰

Table 3: Old Testament Narratives and Spiritual Formation

Old Testament Narratives and Histories and Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	Genesis, most of Exodus, most of Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Additionally, the prophetic books Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai are primarily narratives, along with large portions of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the poetic book of Job
Primary Contribution	To inform and shape one’s worldview about the eternal plan that God is working out universally in human history and also to underscore one’s continuity with the children of Israel as the people of God
Therefore, ask	What does this passage tell readers about God (the hero), God’s plan, or the role that people should be playing in God’s plan?
Secondary Contribution	To give people positive and negative models of old covenant believers making choices to trust God
Therefore, ask	What positive or negative model might this passage be setting before people to teach them about trusting God in the midst of their plan?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 112.

¹⁰ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 112.

Good Boundaries, Good Neighbors: The Law

Patristic Perspective

Kannengiesser noted that Leviticus was not widely utilized with the patristic exegetes and does not provide a survey of thematic coverage for this book. There was not an exegetical focus on the Levitical law with patristic assessments of the Old Testament. Instead they sought to explore the significance of Jesus and the Gospel. There is more to this portion of Scripture than case law; there are also themes that relate to God’s covenantal promises and the ultimate purpose of the law, showing people cannot in their own power do the will of God and not sin. This aligns with patristic thought since it arises in other parts of Scripture.¹¹

Exploring the Law

With the covenants there were promises of blessing and curses. There is not one without the other. God is faithful and provides grace when people fall short. The Law is the covenant agreement God made with Israel after their years of bondage in Egypt. It is not a comprehensive legal code but select illustrative cases teaching values and showing legal principles to serve as a guide to Israel. It was intended to be instructional rather than judicial. It also was Israel’s constitution. The Law gave them objective standards as worshippers and citizens to have good healthy boundaries with one another. It also helped Israel have good national boundaries and be good citizens of the world. By obeying the covenant or law, Israel would fulfill her calling as the descendants of Abraham to bless all peoples (see Table 4).¹²

Table 4: Abrahamic Covenant

Reiterating Abrahamic Covenant	
Gen 12:1–3	Original Covenant Declaration
Gen 13:14–17	After separation from Lot

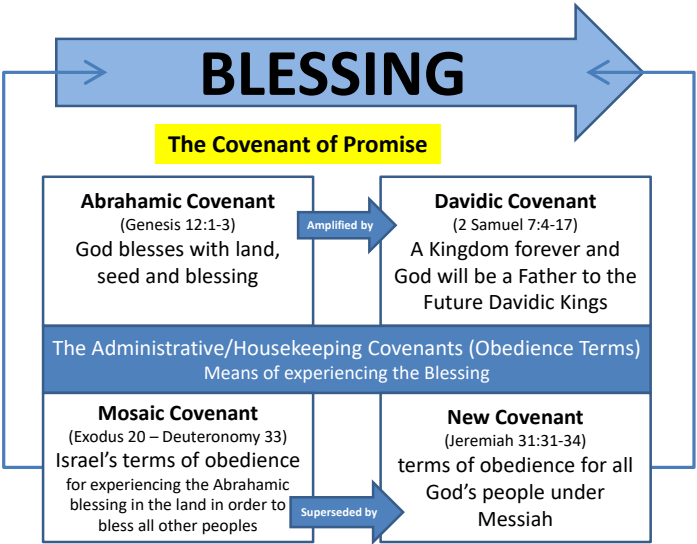
¹¹ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 297.

¹² Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 119–20.

Gen 15:1–6	Promise of Isaac
Gen 15:7–21	Willingness to sacrifice Isaac
Gen 17:1–21	Promise and birth of Isaac
Gen 22:15–19	Promise Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac

Figure 4 shows the relationship of the covenants God made with the nation of Israel, David, and ultimately with all believers. This was God’s ultimate intention formulated in Gen 12:1–3 with the Abrahamic covenant. Patristic exegetes would agree with this figure as they sought ways of understanding the old covenant via the new covenant and the Logos.

Figure 4: Law, Covenant, and Blessing



Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 121.

There are several types of law. Apodictic Law is “absolute law” or laws that state a command or prohibition in a strict categorical or unconditional way. The Ten Commandments are examples of apodictic laws.

Some of these laws include the penalties associated with breaking the laws. Caustic Law or case law has a typical “if-then” pattern. They follow the general form of, if A, then B. God gives representative and illustrative examples where they could see righteous and just principles at work. This shows how to apply case laws in similar situations.

In Christ one is not under the law, so the Mosaic law is not binding as a whole, as New Testament passages suggest. The law’s purpose shows there is no way one can keep it, but God requires a just penalty for sin. In the Old Testament there was the sacrificial system to atone for sin. As believers, Jesus Christ offered up the perfect sacrifice and atonement for peoples’ sins. God’s word in the law reveals aspects of who God is and what sin is. It tells readers what God considers holy and righteous for standards and behavior. The law tells how God views sin and how it affects one’s relationship with God.

The law and spiritual formation

Table 5 suggests a guide for interpretation of Old Testament law for spiritual formation.

Table 5: Law and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of Law to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy (Exodus 20 through Deuteronomy 33)
Primary Contribution	To explain how God relates to people within a covenantal relationship and how God’s holiness and Israel’s sin could be reconciled through Israel’s relationship, the law also demonstrated the concrete, practical and multi-faceted areas in which God’s people should obey and be transformed.
Therefore ask	What does this passage tell people about God and God’s holiness, about Israel and her sin, and about how Israel needed to obey in order to maintain her covenant relationship with God? What specific areas of life does God expect holiness and transformation within God’s people?
Secondary Contribution	To give people ethical and moral illustrations of godly responses to a wide variety of life’s situations
Therefore ask	Are these areas still relevant under the new covenant as areas one should be concerned about and areas in which one should be seeking to obey God?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 127–28.

Souls That Sing: The Psalms

Patristic Perspectives

Kannengiesser noted that the patristic exegetes quoted the Psalms the most in their writings. During this period there was no reduction in the significance of these poetic works. In early doctrinal development the Psalms were key in developing the Church's view of Christology. For example, this was seen in Christ's bodily ascent into heaven via exegetical analysis of Ps 24:7–8. Cyprian used Psalms 45, 46, 68, and 82 to help support the fact that Jesus is fully God. There were divisions of the Psalms from works like that of Theodore of Mopsuestia, namely doctrinal, praise, prophetic, didactic, and exhortatory psalms. Plus, the Psalms are read liturgically more than any other book in the Christian canon.¹³

Kannengiesser also noted how the Psalms were effectively used in the patristic era:

During the era of the Fathers, the Psalter lost none of its importance. Prominent interpreters of the Psalms include Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret. Many of the psalms repeatedly used by the authors of the New Testament also generated much interest among the Fathers. Key psalms shared by the exegetical traditions of both eras were 2, 22, 34, 51, 104, 110, 118, and 119. The messianic motif was central to the Fathers' reading of the Psalms. Several psalms to which the New Testament frequently referred, including Pss 69, 79, 98, 105, and 106, received little attention in the patristic era. Conversely, other psalms, for example, Pss 1, 45, and 50 were very frequently employed by the Fathers yet received little attention in the New Testament. Psalm 1 is a case in point. Though the Psalm itself is never cited in the New Testament, the Fathers almost universally understood the "blessed man" of vv. 1–2 as referring to Christ, and consequently, to all Christians.¹⁴

¹³ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 297–301.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 297.

Exploring the Psalms

Russell’s proposed five types of psalms as shown in Table 6, which are similar to Kannengeiser’s classifications. Jerome, like other patristics, developed in his commentaries and discussed in his sermons the ways Psalms could be used for Christological and Trinitarian purposes.

Table 6: Psalm Categories

Type	Description
Lament	Song expressing sadness by an individual or group and asks Lord’s help to remedy situation
Declarative praise	Song that praises God for their specific deliverance in a situation
Descriptive praise	Praises God for their great attributes and mighty deeds (include kingship royal psalms, enthronement psalms, Songs of Zion, and covenant renewal psalms)
Didactic psalms	Teach about wisdom (e.g., Psalm 1), Torah, or other key topics
Songs of trust	Emphasize God is trustworthy and can be trusted when circumstances are bleak & despairing

Psalms continue today to have a great deal of value to believers. They talk about all the kinds of heartfelt issues people all experience. They are so loved because they move people at a very deep level. At their core Psalms are prayers and poems by Old Testament believers that are set to music and song individually or corporately in Israel. Many were used as worship songs in the temple at Jerusalem. The nature of the book of Psalms explores how individuals deal with the issues of life in a Godly way. There are a number of literary devices used in them.¹⁵

The Psalms are broken up into five books or sections as shown in Table 7.

¹⁵ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 135.

Table 7: Books in the Psalms

Book	Psalm	Comments
Book 1	1–41	41 Psalms, mostly composed by David
Book 2	42–72	31 Psalms, David wrote 18, Solomon wrote 1, Korah wrote 12
Book 3	73–89	17 Psalms, Asaph likely wrote most, David wrote Ps 86, Heman the Ezraite wrote Ps 88, Ethan the Ezraite wrote Ps 89
Book 4	90–106	17 Psalms, most anonymous, Moses wrote Ps 90, David wrote Ps 101 & 103
Book 5	107–150	44 Psalms, David wrote Ps 15, Solomon wrote Ps 127

As shown in Table 8 the authorship is known for about two-thirds of the Psalms as seen below. Not all of the psalms were written by David.¹⁶

Table 8: Authors of Psalms

Author	Number	Psalms
David	73	3–9, 11–32, 34–41, 51–65, 68–70, 86, 101, 103, 108–110, 122, 124, 131, 133, and 138–145
Asaph	12	50, 73–83
Sons of Korah	12	42–49, 84–85, 87, and 88
Solomon	2	72 and 127
Heman the Ezrahite	1	88, it is also listed under the Sons of Korah
Ethan the Ezrahite	1	89
Moses	1	90
Unnamed authors	49	1–2, 10, 33, 66–67, 71, 91–100, 102, 104–107, 111–121, 123, 125–126, 128–130, 132, 134–137, and 146–150

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 127–28.

¹⁶ Ibid., 127–28.

Table 9: Book of Proverbs Elements

Chapter	Section
1:1–7	Title, Purpose, & Motto of Book (Motto = 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; / Fools despise wisdom and instruction”)
1:8–9:18	A Father’s Praise of Wisdom
10:1–22:16	The Proverbs of Solomon
22:17–24:34	Two Sets of Wise Men’s Exhortations
25–29	Further Proverbs of Solomon (Hezekiah’s collection)
30	The Words of Agur (musing on the idiosyncrasies of life)
31:1–9	The Words of King Lemuel (which his mother taught him)

Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 127–28.

Wisdom Literature and Spiritual Formation

Since the New Testament does not provide spiritual guidance for things like lending money, borrowing, saving money, making friends, dealing with life’s difficult issues, human suffering, death of a child, disease, crippling injury, training and disciplining children, meaning of work, play, success or life in general, theology of material romance and sexuality, etc., one can look to Wisdom literature. Therefore, Russell encourages readers to drink deeply from these resources.¹⁷

Table 10: Wisdom Literature and Spiritual Formation

Wisdom Literature and Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon
Primary Contribution	They directly (Proverbs) or indirectly (Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon) instruct people how to make wise choices in the essential, daily affairs of life in the difficult, inscrutable events of life
Therefore, ask	What does this passage tell people about what wise, skilled living would be in the area being discussed? What general pattern does this reveal for God’s people, or what specific behaviors does it challenge readers to embrace?

Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 162.

¹⁷ Russell., *Playing with Fire*, 157–58.

Heart for God: The Prophets

Patristic Perspective

Kannengiesser explored the patristic coverage of the major prophets and the minor prophets. Origen wrote a commentary on Isaiah, but unfortunately it is lost to readers today. People have insight into his perspectives based on sermons. What is seen as a common theme is seeing the prophetic texts in light of a Christ-centric paradigm, seeing evidence of the Messiah and the suffering servant. Early on, commentaries were developed with little regard for the original historical setting they were from. In doctrinal development Isaiah played many key roles; for example, understanding the virgin birth. There was opposition from leaning into Gnostic tendencies to allegorize Isaiah's prophecies of end times into their concepts of *pleroma*. Isaiah is used heavily in liturgical settings, only second to the use of Psalms. Jeremiah also had wide use. In terms of doctrinal development, Irenaeus used Jer. 17:9 to help explain Christ's divinity and humanity. Gregory of Nazianzus talked extensively on articulating God's incomprehensibility by considering Jer. 23:24. Additionally Kannengiesser examined Lamentations and includes non-canonical books like Baruch.¹⁸ He noted that the twelve minor prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) were known as a literary unit for the patristics. They were then referred to as the twelve. Augustine instead used the term minor prophets.¹⁹

Exploring the Prophets

The patristics found great interest in Isaiah with its Messianic prophecies. Origen developed the first patristic commentary on Isaiah. Patristic exegetes like Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine explored Isaiah 53 and its discussion of the suffering servant in light of Christ's coming. This strongly aligned with their desire to find Christ in its verses. Today people often identify prophecy exclusively with future predictions and colorful pictures seen in passages like the fiery chariots in Ezekiel 1 or the terrifying beasts with ten horns in Daniel 7. Yet, prophetic statistics show that:

¹⁸ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 311–18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 326–34.

- Less than 2% of the Hebrew Bible speaks about the Messiah
- Less than 5% of the prophecies speak about the new covenant era
- Less than 1% predict future events

Prophets and Spiritual Formation

Reading the prophets give people exhortations. The prophets were covenant enforcers, people who spoke to God’s people on their behalf. These exhortations are useful since people tend to wander off like the Israelites did.²⁰ To fully appreciate what the prophets were addressing it is important to have a high degree of understanding of the background information. In terms of prophecies about the future, few extended into what is now the present day future. Note that less than 2% of prophecies speak about the Messiah. Table 11 shows how the prophets can be utilized in spiritual formation.

Table 11: Prophets and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Prophets to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel (called the Major Prophets) and Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (called the Minor Prophets)
Primary Contribution	To exhort people about the rewards of covenant obedience and warn them of the discipline of disobedience under the old covenant, so that one is challenged to maintain one’s heart for God and one’s just treatment of others as one lives under the new covenant
Therefore, ask	What does this passage or oracle tell one about Israel’s behavior in her covenantal relationship with God and about God’s response to God’s people, and those areas that one may also be susceptible to neglect within one’s new covenant relationship?
Secondary Contribution	To give glimpses into the immediate future of God’s people or into the distant future of the messianic/new covenant era and the superseding blessing of life in this climactic era.
Therefore, ask	What does this passage or oracle tell about God’s plans for Israel (now past) or God’s plans for the new covenant people (now present or still future)?

Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 189.

²⁰ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 177–78.

Discipleships: The Gospels

Patristic Perspective

Kannengiesser explored each of the four Gospels separately. He first looked at Matthew, observing how Irenaeus refers to the early Church's use. This correlates with the view that it was an early Gospel. As an example of a significant passage in this Gospel, one can see the utility of the Great Commission in Matt 28:19. This supports the doctrine of a Trinitarian God and the importance of baptism. It clearly has an important place in doctrinal development. Since other Gospels are longer and more involved, the Gospel of Mark does not receive as much assessment by the patristics. Clement of Alexandria states that Mark was written in response to the urging of many believers in Rome. The earliest known commentary on Luke is the work of Origen. Only a few extant fragments still exist. It is common for Luke and Acts to be viewed as a single entity. Ignatius of Antioch most likely knew and used this fourth Gospel. Irenaeus extensively used this Gospel in *Against Heresies*. John's Gospel played a key role in Trinitarian and Christological discussions. This started in the early church and extended into the significant arguments in the fourth and fifth centuries.²¹

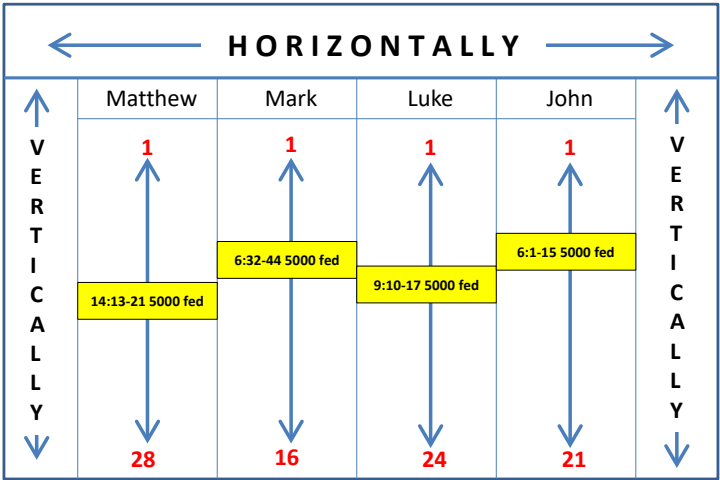
Exploring the Gospels

The Gospels contain parables, miracle stories, pronouncement stories, and other forms like legal sayings, beatitudes and woes, announcement and nativity stories, calling and recognition scenes, and farewell addresses. They provide examples where one can be spiritually formed, like Mark 4:35–41 in which Jesus is calming the waves, wind and sea. Gospel reading can benefit from including both vertical and horizontal thinking and reading, seeing how up to all four of the gospels address a passage. Vertical reading should take precedence. Jesus feeding the 5,000 appears in each of the gospels, and one can use the information to help form a whole picture as shown in Figure 5 and Table 12.²²

²¹ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 336–47.

²² Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 325–33.

Figure 5: Feeding 5,000: Reading Gospels Horizontally and Vertically



Source: Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 325–32.

Table 12: Synoptic Gospel Parallels

Synoptic Gospels Verse Commonality		
Matthew	Mark	Luke
Contains 1068 verses	Contains 661 verses	Contains 1149 verses
Triple Tradition – about 540 verses of Mark		
Matthew-Mark – about 90 verses of Mark		
Matthew-Luke (Q) – about 200 verses		Matthew-Luke (Q) – about 200 verses
Matthew alone (M) – about 300 verses	Mark alone – about 20 verses	Luke alone (L) – about 500 verses

Gospels and Spiritual Formation

Below are seven principles for reading the Gospels for spiritual formation followed by Table 13 showing how the Gospels are useful in spiritual formation.

- Because the Gospels (like the Hebrew Bible histories) are narratives one should emphasize the broader context when reading
- The Gospels demand some background information regarding history and culture
- The focus of the Gospels is on Jesus and not on people
- A primary goal of the Gospels is to prove that Jesus is Messiah, not to prove Jesus is God
- With four different Gospels, one should compare accounts when appropriate
- One needs to understand the centrality of the kingdom of God in the Gospels
- The Gospels and Spiritual Formation: One should allow oneself to be a disciple of Jesus

Table 13: Gospels and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Gospels to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Primary Contribution	To teach about who Jesus the Messiah is and give the opportunity to be discipled by him as one observes him and his disciples; also, to observe him modeling life in the kingdom of God and listen to him about how one should live in the kingdom and be transformed in areas of sinful resistance
Therefore ask	What does this passage tell one about who Jesus is and about how one should respond to being his disciple? How then should one live as a citizen of the kingdom of God?
Secondary Contribution	To give insight into how one may encourage fellow disciples
Therefore ask	Are there certain principles or methods of ministry that Jesus is modeling as he ministers to his disciples or others that would be appropriate for one to imitate in their ministries?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 211–12.

Our Purpose: The Acts of the Apostles

Patristic Perspectives

Kannengiesser combined Luke and Acts in his assessment. The patristic exegetes did look specifically at the significance of the Acts of the Apostles. Patristic commentaries were written by Origen, Didymus of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuetis, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom. The only extant one is the series of sermons from John Chrysostom. Augustine also addressed Acts and wrote about an allegorical interpretative poem of Arator.²³

Exploring Acts

Acts is Luke's second book, so it bears a strong resemblance to the Gospel genre. It portrays key episodes in the lives of several early church leaders. Ten of the twelve apostles only appear in the opening chapters. The power and impact of working of the Holy Spirit is important in the book of Acts. There is a new spiritual empowerment available that from this time on will be available to followers of Christ.

Acts and Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation themes are found in Acts, like taking an offering for the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:27–30). A spiritual key is knowing and sending relief to those in need. There are three useful principles when reading Acts, along with the spiritual formation principles listed in Table 14.

- Grasp the whole to understand the part
- Emphasize Luke's emphasis for maximal spiritual impact
- Be impacted by the godly models and imitate their faith

²³ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 344.

Table 14: Acts and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Book of Acts to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Book	Acts of the Apostles
Primary Contribution	To teach what God is doing in history at the present time under the kingship of Jesus the Messiah and to model what peoples' corresponding purpose is as God's new covenant people; it also explains peoples' roots, as well as some of the fruits of peoples' identity as the church as people fulfill their purpose in the world
Therefore, ask	What does this passage tell readers about their purpose and focus as God's people and how one should respond to being a part of the church and living as a citizen of the kingdom of God?
Secondary Contribution	To give readers methods and teachings for ministry to others
Therefore, ask	Are there certain methods or techniques of ministry that the apostles or others are modeling as they minister that would be appropriate for people to imitate in their ministries?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 216.

Community: The Epistles

Patristic Perspective

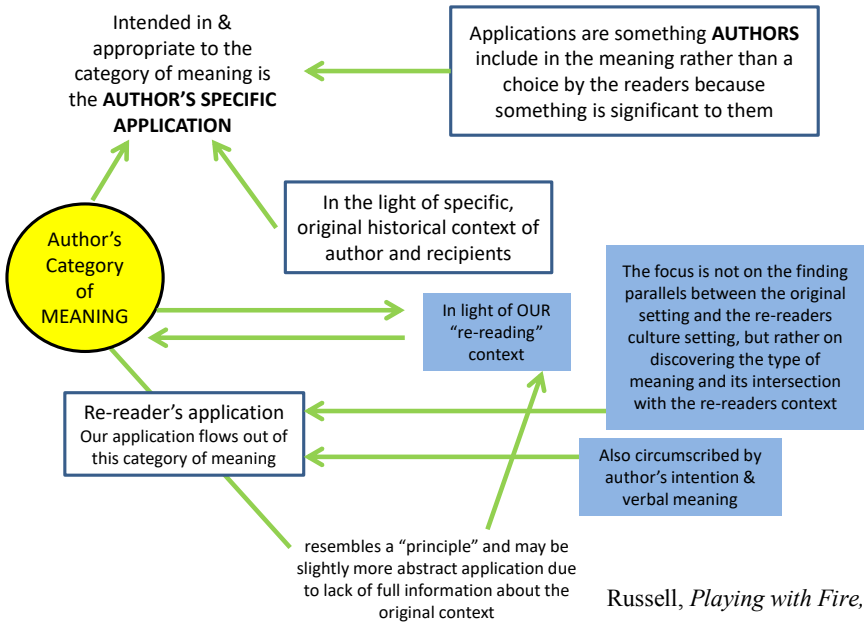
Kannengiesser classified the epistles into several groups. First, he considered the Pauline epistles, as well as Hebrews. Paul has the largest number of letters. One can see the significant influence of his letters in the letter of Clement to the Corinthians, the letters of Ignatius, and the letter of Polycarp to the Philippians. Most of the early church apologists did not use Paul's writings. Gnostic writers also referred to Paul. Irenaeus and Tertullian saw Paul's writings as an important part of the New Testament. Second, Kannengiesser considered the Catholic epistles. Eusebius told of the works of Clement of Alexandria who included thoughts on these letters. Others have looked at them as well. Kannengiesser looked at James, noting how it deals with James' views of the virtues of moral and spiritual practice. Origen perceived this and encouraged believers to be doers of the word (James 1:22). Dealing with his ideas that faith without works is dead spawned plenty of debate. 1 Peter impacted doctrinal development by influencing the formation of the creed by stating Jesus descended into hell between his death and resurrection. Gregory of Nazianzus argued that had to do with rescue. 1 Pet

2:22–33 provides a rich narrative for trinity and soteriology, as well as moral instruction. In terms of 1, 2, and 3 John, there are a few references to these works in commentaries, like Augustine. He developed the virtue of charity in homilies and includes John’s letters in this work.²⁴

Exploring the Epistles

Although the Epistles were written to specific churches, there is no evidence that they were only to be read by original recipient. For example, Paul wrote, “When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. Col 4:16).” So, the New Testament Epistles’ authors intended them to be circulated. The Epistles are the most context-specific type of biblical literature. They demand knowing about the sender’s and the recipients’ lives and the historical context and background more than other genre.²⁵ 0 shows the application process.

Figure 6: Epistle Application Process



Source:
Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 233–34.

²⁴ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 354–67.

²⁵ Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 233–34.

Epistles and Spiritual Formation

Clement and Origen sought to dig through the layers of Biblical meaning and discover hidden gems or spiritual truth separate from simplistic literal and historical narratives and images. So, they would seek hidden references to the Logos and spiritual existence and writings of the Prophets and Apostles.²⁶ Below are four epistle reading principles along with examples of how they are useful for spiritual formation as listed in Tables 15 and 16.

- Read an epistle in one sitting helps get the big idea and main contours
- Think in terms of the paragraph being the main point of thought
- Know letter structure to know where one is at in the letter
- Do background reading to understand epistle's main concern, and historical and cultural setting

Table 15: Epistle Example of Spiritual Formation

Ephesians 4:25–32				
Application is Part of Assessing the Author's Intended Meaning in the Passage				
Verse	Divisive sins	Replace with underlying traits	Replacement rationale	Application Paul wants readers to make
25	Lying	Speaking truthfully	People are members of one another (one Body)	Stop lying and speak truthfully to one another
26–27	Explosive, sinful anger remains	Righteous wrath that is quickly reconciled	Devil will exploit unresolved and sinful anger (cause divisions)	Let day of anger be day of reconciliation
28	Stealing	Working with one's hands	One can share with others who have needs	Stop stealing and start working, so people can share
29–30	Unwholesome worthless words	Edifying (building up) words	People will benefit those who hear and not grieve the Holy Spirit	Stop speaking worthless words and edify with words of grace to one another
31–32	Bitter, divisive feelings and actions	Being kind, tender hearted, and forgiving towards one another	God forgave people	Stop bitter, divisive feelings and actions and be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving instead

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 240.

²⁶ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 201–2.

Table 16: Epistles and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Epistles to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John and Jude
Primary Contribution	To teach, exhort, and model one's identity as the church and how people are to live it in the community of God's people by making godly choices in a myriad of practical areas in order to fulfill one's purpose
Therefore, ask	What does this passage tell about one's identity in Christ and about specific choices one should make to underscore that identity or enhance peoples' unity and ministry as God's primary means of ministry in the world?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 216.

Living Expectantly: Revelation

Patristic Perspective

Kannengiesser examined the variety of thoughts on Revelation. Justin stated that he had personal knowledge of this prophecy. Commentaries and extensive references exist like the commentary from Melito of Sardis (unfortunately not extant), and the apologetic works of Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus. There was opposition to the book, like that of heretical views of Marcion, and attribution of this work to Gnostic sources by Gaius of Rome. Eusebius documenting the historical record did not have an enthusiastic view of the work. Victorinus, Bishop of Pettau wrote the earliest extant commentary. Augustine adopted a figurative-ecclesiological interpretation of Revelation 20. Revelation informs about Christ before the incarnation, the end of time tribulation, and eventual blessing. It also contributes to Christology and is useful in liturgy, being read on Holy Thursday.²⁷

Exploring Revelation

Revelation is unique in the Bible, appealing to the imagination. Table 17 shows its themes, with a disciplined use of one's imagination via word

²⁷ Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 368–72.

pictures. One can allow oneself to be taken away by these images. They each contribute to an overall impression. John wrote about a series of visions in an apocalyptic genre and powerful imagery. John also wrote about seeing a beast rising out of the sea having ten horns and seven heads (13:1). This vision does not suggest a beast like this existed. It did, however, have profound significance to John. The focus is the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of God’s kingdom.²⁸

Table 17: Revelation Themes

Revelation’s Purpose: encourage church to overcome in difficult times by revealing God’s triumph over Satan by establishing Christ’s kingdom, and new heavens and earth				
Revelation 1:19 Jesus says to John, “Write therefore ...				
The things you have seen ... Revelation 1 PAST	And the things which are ... Revelation 2–3 PRESENT	And the things which shall take place after these things ... Revelation 4–22 FUTURE		
John focuses on majesty of Christ’s authority when he commissioned him to write down the revelation	Jesus focuses on the state of the seven churches of Asia, giving warnings, solutions, and rewards to those who overcome	In heaven Revelation 4–5 All heaven worships God as Creator (Chapter 4) and Jesus as the Lamb (chapter 5)	On earth Revelation 5–20 3 judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls), destroys Babylon & establishes Son’s kingdom	In heaven Revelation 21–22 A new heaven and earth will be established by God

Source: Russell, *Playing with Fire*, 258.

There are four interpretation approaches for Revelation. (1) The **allegorical approach** (also called idealistic or spiritualistic) sees Revelation as an allegory about good and evil, eternally in conflict in every era. Therefore, the symbols and events are not tied to any particular historical events. (2) The **preterist approach** sees Revelation as a record of early church conflicts with Judaism and paganism in the first century AD. Therefore, all events were fulfilled in the past. (3) The **historical approach** sees Revelation as a picture book of the continuous history of the church’s first century to Christ’s second coming. (4) The **futurist approach** sees Revelation 4–22 describing future events that still await fulfillment.

²⁸ Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 11–19.

Revelation and Spiritual Formation

In terms of spiritual formation there are five considerations when looking at Revelation, plus Table 18 shows guidelines for spiritual formation.

- Do not shy away from Revelation because of its distinctive genre
- Revelation is about Jesus Christ, not Satan or the Antichrist
- Revelation is mostly prophetic words to the church, and exhortations for holy living via vivid picture of God’s future triumph through Christ
- Revelation is about the end of history. It is not meant as a realistic glimpse of the future to inform godly choices today
- Revelation is filled with Old Testament allusions, and it functions as a Scriptural capstone for what God did in history

Table 18: Revelation and Spiritual Formation

Contribution of the Book of Revelation to Spiritual Formation	
Biblical Books	The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John
Primary Contribution	To encourage and exhort people to overcome through continued faith and faithfulness in the difficult times by revealing God’s ultimate triumph over Satan in establishing Christ’s kingdom and the new heavens and new earth
Therefore ask	What insights into God’s ultimate triumph does this passage give and how does it encourage one to live faithfully and courageously today in the face of opposition to and persecution of the church?
Secondary Contribution	To inform people of some of the specific events signaling the end of the age
Therefore ask	What can one learn about where God is going to take history and glorify themselves as one sees what events God will sovereignly allow at the end of the age?

Source: Russell, Playing with Fire, 216.

Conclusions

The patristic exegetes focused on the spiritual and seeking the Bible’s deeper meaning. Spiritual insight of the Logos throughout scripture was an overarching goal, primarily among allegorical proponents. Practical application is one source of this deeper focus, and reading scripture for spiritual formation can be a key way of understanding the message well and

seeking to apply it in one's life. Modern hermeneutical approaches can benefit from patristic exegetes in this front. The patristics sought deeper spiritual insight in scripture but had varying effectiveness when considered by genre. Modern methods examine the genre first and then seek deeper meaning and spiritual formation. The patristics did not categorically make this distinction. Based on Kannengiesser and the modern hermeneutical scholars' assessments in this paper, Table 19 shows a relative ranking of the genre value between the patristic and modern approaches.

Table 19. Genre Ranking Comparison: Patristic vs. Modern

Genre	Patristic	Modern
OT Narratives	6.High	4.High
Law	8.Low	9.Medium
Psalms-Poetry	4.High	6.Medium
Wisdom	7.Medium	8.Medium
Prophets	5.High	5.High
Gospels	1.Highest-value	1.Highest-value
Acts	3.High	3.High
Epistles	2.High	2.High
Revelation	9.Low	7.Medium

Reading the Bible for information is transformational, but spiritual formation opposes simple information awareness and presses to deeper spiritual levels. Since the Bible contains God's words, its power extends beyond comprehension, but one can know in part what God reveals. Modern exegetes would benefit from embracing the deeper spiritual insights that Origen and Augustine sought. Russell's spiritual formation emphasis aligns with Augustine's spiritual burning that transformed his life and the patristic exegetes seeking deeper spiritual meaning in scripture. For modern hermeneutics, the spiritual focus of the patristics can complement a modern scientific centric knowledge base, and together they can form a better interpretive method.

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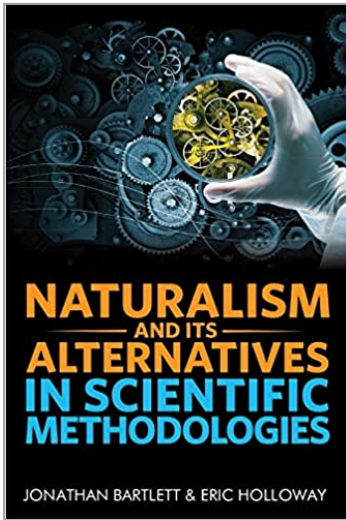
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